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ABSTRACT

The current state of research on cross-cultural speech acts is examined, its applicability to the second language classroom is evaluated, and new directions for research, with more relevance for classroom practice, are recommended. Problems found with cross-cultural speech act research to date include questions it has raised about the universal applicability of several theoretical notions of pragmatics, use of a limited range of variables, and inadequate use of ethnographic methods. In addition, the usefulness of the findings in second language instruction are limited. Suggestions are made for solving several theoretical and methodological problems in the research, including: establishment of explicit criteria for comparability across languages; more attention to the constraints on speech acts by domains of interaction, status and role relationships, and other situational factors; focus on how speech acts interact with cooperative and politeness principles; search for a clearer understanding of individual self vs. group/familial self and positive vs. negative face in different domains and cultures; and reduce emphasis on native-like performance. In conclusion, the implications of such research for the teaching of English as an international language are discussed. Contains over 60 references. (MSE)

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CROSSCULTURAL SPEECH ACT RESEARCH AND THE CLASSROOM

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics, especially speech act theory, has proved to be one of the most attractive areas of research in language teaching and learning for one obvious reason: it is assumed to provide access to a research area and a set of methodologies which help in teaching and learning the use of language in context. As far as I know, there has been no attempt to examine this assumption explicitly. In this paper, I hope to accomplish three goals: give a brief account of the current state of crosscultural speech act research, evaluate its usefulness for the language classroom, and suggest directions for research which will have more relevance for the classroom. Before I begin, however, let me outline briefly the theoretical background of crosscultural speech act research.

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SPEECH ACTS

Speech act theory, as is well-known, is concerned with the use of language to do things and provides a universal characterization of the relationship between 'uttering' and 'doing' (Austin 1962, Searle 1969). There are clearly problems with speech act theory which have been discussed extensively in the literature. For instance, the difference between performatives and constantives is not clear-cut, as was recognized by Austin and has been further discussed by Leech (1983), Levinson (1983), Searle (1969), and others. It is questionable how far speech acts such as promise, *offer*, *request*, *demand*, etc. are discrete categories (Leech 1983). Leech (1983: 178) suggests that they may be more like *puddles*, *ponds* and *lakes* than *monkeys* and *giraffes*. It is also not clear that the locutionary sense, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary effects can be calculated exclusively on the basis of an utterance and the speaker's intentions in uttering it. The role of illocutionary force indicating devices other than the utterance itself, and contextual variables, including the hearer and the receiver, are important for at least some illocutionary acts (Edmondson 1981, Hancher 1979, Leech 1983). One crucial area of difficulty from the point of view of the classroom is the relationship between speech acts, the cooperative principle (Grice 1975), and politeness principles (Brown and Levinson 1987). This topic has not yet been explored explicitly, although it has been mentioned briefly in Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech (1983), and Levinson (1983), among others. This point will be taken up later.

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CROSSCULTURAL SPEECH ACTS

Recent research on crosscultural speech acts has raised serious questions about the universal applicability of several theoretical notions of pragmatics (Levinson 1983, Green 1989), including speech acts, Gricean maxims (Grice 1975), and the politeness principle (Leech 1983). Unlike theoretical discussions, where an implicit assumption is made that speech acts refer to the same social acts in all cultures, Fraser et al. (1980: 78) explicitly claim that although languages may differ as to how and when speech acts are to be performed, every language "makes available to the user the same basic set of speech acts. . . the same set of strategies—semantic formulas—for performing a given speech act." In contrast, Wierzbicka (1985a, 1985b) claims that speech genres and speech acts are not comparable across cultures and suggests a semantic metalanguage for the cross-cultural comparison of speech acts.[1] Flowerdew (1990) points out some of the central problems of speech act theory, including the question of the number of speech acts. Wolfson et al. (1989) suggest that "just as different cultures divide the color spectrum into noncorresponding overlapping terms, so the repertoire of speech acts for each culture is differently organized" (p. 180). Matsumoto (1988, 1989) questions the adequacy of the theoretical notions of conversational implicature as proposed by Grice, and 'face' as postulated by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) to account for the politeness phenomena in Japanese conversational interactions. Wetzel (1988) concludes that the notion of 'power' as discussed in Brown and Gilman (1960) is culturally bound and, therefore, not applicable to a discussion of verbal interaction in Japanese.

Discussing the problems in attempting to use the speech act theory in the analysis of conversation, Schegloff (1988) asserts that speech act theoretic analysis has no way of handling temporality and sequentiality of utterances in actual conversation. Schmidt (1983: 126) points out the limited applicability of speech act theory in the analysis of conversation because speech acts "are usually defined in terms of speaker intentions and beliefs, whereas the nature of conversation depends crucially on interaction between speaker and hearer."

Furthermore, cross-cultural speech act research so far has utilized only a limited range of variables, e.g., those of social distance and dominance (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989), and, as Rose (1992) shows, even those are not well-defined.

As regards the data for empirical research on speech acts, only a few studies have utilized the ethnographic method of observation and analysis of utterances produced in real life interactions. Notable among them are the studies of compliments in American English by Manes and Wolfson (1981), of compliments in American and South African English by Herbert (1989), of invitations in American English by Wolfson, D'Amico-Reisner, and Huber (1983), of requests in Hebrew by Blum-Kulka, Danet, and Gherson (1985), and of apologies in New Zealand English by Holmes (1990). The bulk of speech act research, including crosscultural speech act research, has been conducted using either role play or written questionnaires. Furthermore, only a limited range of speech acts have been researched, the most commonly studied ones being requests and apologies, as in Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989).

Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) represents the culmination of the project on Crosscultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) initiated in 1982 by a number of researchers in several countries. Data were collected from the following native speaker groups: Danish; American,Australian, and British English; Canadian French; German; Hebrew; and

Argentinian Spanish. Among the non-native speakers were those of: English in Denmark, Germany, and the United States; German in Denmark; and Hebrew in Israel. The instrument used for data collection was a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) consisting of scripted dialogues of sixteen situations, eight each for requests and apologies. The tasks were constructed to account for variation in speech act realization determined by social distance and dominance. The tasks did involve some role play in that the subjects were, for example, asked to assume the roles of a waiter, a professor, etc. According to Blum-Kulka (1989: 68)), the results of the CCSARP data "revealed the prominence of conventional indirectness as a highly favored requesting option exploited by all the languages studied." For apologies, Olshtain (1989: 171) claims that the CCSARP data showed "surprising similarities in IFID [Illocutionary Force Indicating Device] and expression of responsibility preferences."

RELEVANCE FOR LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The question that is crucial for relating research in pragmatics to language learning and teaching is: how applicable are the findings of crosscultural speech act research to the teaching of a second or foreign language? Let me review some of the findings of a select number of studies to arrive at an answer to the question.

Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) claim to have met the challenge of widening the scope of speech act research by breaking out of the mold of Anglo-cultural ethnocentricity. However, as Rose (1992) points out, all of the languages and varieties studied under CCSARP are either Germanic or Romance, and all of the cultures are either western, or heavily influenced by western culture. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 14) themselves note that the DCT was designed to reflect "every day occurrences of the type expected to be familiar to speakers across *western* cultures" [emphasis added].

That, however, does not mean that there are no studies that incorporate data from non-western languages and cultures. Rose (1992) is a large-scale study of requests in American English and Japanese involving more than 150 Japanese subjects and 90 English subjects. The study used both the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) and Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) to determine the efficacy of such instruments in eliciting reliable data for crosscultural speech act research. The results are interesting on two counts. First, the results of the DCT challenge the prevalent notion that Japanese cultural norms prefer indirectness in verbal communication. The DCT results showed that Japanese requests were more direct than English requests, and conventionally indirect requests were most frequent for both groups. Secondly, for both English and Japanese, there were significant differences between responses on the DCT and the MCQ. While Americans chose to opt out of requests more frequently on the MCQ, Japanese chose to both opt out and use hints more frequently on the MCQ. Rose (1992: 107) concludes that the patterning of responses "seems to support the claim that there are problems with elicited data."

Another study of requests in Chinese and English (Huang 1992), which involved 53 subjects in Taiwan and 27 subjects in the USA, showed that the Chinese preferred the strategies of direct request, including imperatives and query preparatory, which refer to the addressee's ability and willingness to carry out the act. American English speakers, on the other hand,

preferred the query preparatory in all situations. Also, there were significant differences between the use of alerters, such as "excuse me," or a term of address. The Chinese data had more occurrences of alerters, especially terms of address, in all situations as compared to the English data. Another significant finding was that there was no evidence for a 'bulge' phenomenon (Wolfson 1989) in Chinese. That is, unlike English, the two extremes of social distance—minimum and maximum—do not trigger similar behavior among the subjects as compared to relationships which are more toward the center.

Yet another pilot study of requests in American English and Thai (Tirawanchai 1992) involving 8 American and 8 Thai subjects shows that whereas the most common request strategy in the American data is query preparatory, the Thai subjects had no preferred strategy across the situations. What is significant is that in several situations, the Thai subjects preferred not to request in order to avoid confrontation. The distribution of opting out of the speech act across situations is as follows in the data:

1. STs:	1	2	3	6	7	8
AE	12.5%	12.5%	—	12.5%	—	—
Thai	50%	37.5%	75%	25%	25%	87.5%

Situation 1 involves an unfamiliar peer, whereas situations 3 and 8 involve a person of higher status—a professor. In the first situation, half of the Thai subjects preferred not to perform the speech act, and in the other two, a majority of them preferred the same course of action (or, lack of action). These results seem to correlate with the value the Thais attach to avoiding confrontation, and showing respect to persons of superior status.

Although these studies point to the undeniable value of including data from non-western languages and cultures in speech act research, they illustrate several difficulties in arriving at a clear understanding of speech acts in specific languages and cultures. The variability of data determined by elicitation instruments—DCT vs. MCQ—needs further examination. Also, these studies still have the same limitations as earlier studies. Except for the few ethnographic studies mentioned earlier, all these studies draw data from a limited population—university or college students. They are also restricted to domains of interaction familiar to the subject population. It is difficult to claim that generalizations based on such studies, which elicit data consistent with some assumed 'norm' in the community, would be valid for the culture as a whole, and should be presented in the classroom as models. This is not to deny that these studies have value if they do elicit the assumed 'norms' instead of 'real' performance data; however, they can not be the sole basis for postulating generalizations about the 'usual' practice in the speech community.

DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Does that mean that we should abandon the attempts at incorporating insights of research in pragmatics, and especially speech acts, into language teaching and learning? The answer is obvious: any attempt at reducing the danger of what Thomas (1983) calls 'pragmatic failure' is

worth making. A slight digression may make my point clearer.

The misunderstanding resulting from cross-cultural linguistic interaction was explicitly recognized in several quarters almost a century ago. For instance, Holcombe (1895: 274-275, quoted in Goffman 1967: 29) observes:

> Much of the falsehood to which the Chinese as a nation are said to be addicted is a result of the demands of etiquette. A plain, frank "no" is the height of discourtesy. Refusal or denial of any sort must be softened and toned down into an expression of regretted inability. . . Centuries of practice in this form of evasion have made the Chinese matchlessly fertile in the invention and development of excuses. . .

More recently, discussing the interpretation native speakers of English give to the utterances of non-native speakers, Gass and Selinker (1983: 12) state (emphasis in the original):

> These speakers are often viewed as rude or uncooperative,. . . or, arrogant or insincere. Native speakers are much more likely to attribute grammatical or phonological errors to a lack of knowledge of the target language. . . conversational features are subtle and not easily recognizable; hence their basis is attributed not to the language of the speaker but to the *personality* of the speaker.

In order to produce crosscultural speech act research which would be useful in language teaching and learning and reduce the chances of pragmatic failure, several theoretical and methodological problems need to be solved. I will concentrate on only a few of these.

First, we need explicit criteria of comparability across languages and cultures to identify particular speech acts, or sets of speech acts. The labels we have been using are inadequate, as has been pointed out in the literature cited above. For instance, there are no speech act labels equivalent to apologizing, complimenting, requesting, and thanking in Hindi (see Y. Kachru 1993 for a detailed discussion of expressing gratitude and apology in Hindi). It does not, however, mean that Hindi speakers do not express regret, appreciation, gratitude, etc. The expressions that are roughly equivalent to *apology*, *compliment*, *request* and *thank* are given in 2a-d, respectively (the letters in parentheses indicate the sources of the item: H=Hindi, S=Sanskrit, and U=Urdu):

2. a. *khed* (S), 'pain, distress'; *kṣamā* (S), *māfī* (U) 'forgiveness'
   b. *beṛā* (H), *praśnsā* (S), *tārīf* (U) 'praise'
   c. *anurodh* (S) 'request', *prārthanā* (S) 'prayer'
   d. *ābhār* (S), *kritaǰñatā* (S), *šukra* (U) 'gratitude'

Note, however, that all the above items have equivalents in English which are far from the sense of apology, etc. This can be clarified by looking at one example in some detail. The lexical item khed in Hindi does not have the properties of apology, though the bilingual dictionaries cite the item as having the same sense. According to Wierzbicka (1987:215):

3. *apologize* means

I know that I *caused something to happen* that was bad for you
I think that *you may think something bad about me* because of that and feel something bad *towards me* because of that
I say: I feel something bad because of that
I don't want you to *think something bad about me* because of that and to feel something bad *towards me* because of that
I say this because I should say it to you

On the other hand,
khed prəkəṭ kərnā means
I know something happened that was bad for you
I think that you may feel bad because of that
I say: I feel bad because of that
I don't want you to feel bad because of that
I say this because I think I should say it to you

Examples: *muʃhe khed hai ki bāriš se āpko parešānī huī.*

I am sorry that you were inconvenienced by rain.

muʃhe khed hai ki səxt sirdərd kī vəʃəh se mãĩ āpke sāth nāṭək dekhne nə jā səkī.

I regret that I could not go to the play with you because of a severe headache.

Note that the Hindi item does not express any personal causation for whatever happened, or any ill feeling on the part of the addressee toward the one who is expressing regret [see the italicized items in the meaning of *apologize*.].

Similarly, there is no exact equivalent for the term *politeness* in Hindi. The bilingual dictionaries (Bahri 1960, Bulke 1968) give the following equivalents:

4. Bahri: *sisṭətā*, (culture, learning, refinement), *saujãṇyə*, (goodness, kindness, benevolence, friendliness), *sisṭacār* (practice or conduct of the learned or virtuous, good manners, proper behavior: MonierWilliams 1899)
Bulke: *šisṭətā*, *bhədrətā* [from *bhədrə* (disciplined, cultured, educated) + *tā* (nominalizing suffix)]

In some recent studies of Indian English, however, the terms *məryādā* "propriety of conduct" and *lihāz* "deference" have been suggested as representing the relevant concepts for *politeness* and *deference* in the Indian context (Y. Kachru 1991, 1992, Pandharipande 1992).

A detailed discussion of what these terms mean is beyond the scope of this study.

Secondly, we must have more explicit knowledge of how speech acts are constrained by domains of interaction, status and role relationships, and other situational factors. For instance, in the public domain, cross-sex complimenting behavior with respect to one's appearance is impossible in South Asian society. Complimenting someone on his/her healthy appearance, or complimenting someone's child's appearance could produce anxiety with respect to the 'evil eye' phenomenon.[2] Complimenting someone on his/her learning, wisdom, accomplishments, skills, actions or behavior, however, is perfectly acceptable. A typical compliment may be as follows:

5. Nagaraj...said, 'I have not had the good fortune to learn Sanskrit-only English and Tamil.'
   The pundit said, 'I am not surprised. Sanskrit is not a bazaar language. it[sic] is known as "Deva Basha". Do you know what it means?'
   '"Language of gods",' translated Nagaraj promptly, feeling proud of his answer ...
   'At least you know this much; I am glad. Are you aware Sanskrit can not be picked up at any wayside shop? *You must have performed meritorious deeds in several births to be blessed with a tongue that could spell the Sanskrit alphabet.*'
   '*Ah, what wisdom*, perhaps one's ears too must be blessed to hear the Sanskrit sound,' added Nagaraj, much to the delight of the pundit. More wrinkles appeared on his face as his smile broadened. Nagaraj added to the pleasure of this dialogue by saying, '*God creates a scholar like your good self to kindle the flame of knowledge in an ignoramus like me.*'
   'Ah, do not degrade yourself,' said the pundit. '*You talk like a poet, no wonder you want to engage yourself in kavya.*'

   [Narayan, R.K. 1990. *The world of Nagaraj.* London: Heinemann. 95-96]

6. Husband to wife: How lucky I am to have a wife like you.

7. Mother to daughter: I must have performed many virtuous deeds my last life to have a daughter like you in this one.

Whereas the example in (5) represents a 'high style' interaction, examples in (6) and (7) are normal in the family domain. There usually is no verbal response to a compliment as in (6) and (7).

I have suggested elsewhere on the basis of data from Indian English that a more complete set of variables, e.g., the set proposed in Hymes (1972; see also Saville-Troike 1982) is likely to be more useful in crosscultural speech act research. Hymes (1972) includes setting (temporal, spatial, etc.), scene (cultural definition of the occasion), participants, purposes or outcome, goals, message form, message content, keys (manner of saying something, e.g., joking), channels (oral, written, etc.), forms of speech (codes, varieties, etc.), norms of interaction, norms of interpretation, and genres (e.g., curses, prayers, myths, etc.) among the relevant variables. It is, of course, obvious that further research is needed to validate the usefulness of the grid provided

by Hymes. Nevertheless, it has been found to be useful to account for the Indian English data I have discussed in my work (1991, 1992).

Thirdly, we must have a more complete understanding of how speech acts interact with Gricean cooperative and politeness principles. For instance, is it possible to set up grids which will predict that flouting of a particular Gricean maxim will have a specific effect on the illocutionary force of a specific speech act and the perceived politeness in interaction? Let us consider a hypothetical case of the speech act of request. Is it possible to say that flouting the maxim of quantity on the plus side, i.e., giving more information than is required, will be perceived as too polite to the nth degree, and too ingratiating, and therefore insincere? There is anecdotal evidence that suggests that letters from international students requesting off prints or other material from Western scholars often produce this reaction.

Fourthly, it is simplistic to categorize societies in terms of vertical vs. horizontal and individualistic vs. group-oriented for the purposes of speech act research as though these labels apply in all domains of a community's life. Matsumoto (1988, 1989) takes for granted that one can clearly demarcate the notion 'self' in terms of individual or group-oriented on the one hand, and societies as either 'vertical' or 'horizontal' on the other. Recent psychoanalytical and social scientific literature, however, suggests a more complicated picture. For instance, Roland (1988: 6) has the following to say in the context of both India and Japan: "I am now convinced that we must speak of three overarching or superordinate organizations of the self: the familial self, the individualized self, and the spiritual self, as well as an expanding self. Each forms a total organization of the self in Eastern and Western (particularly Northern European/American) societies, respectively, with varying suborganizations." It is clear from the discussion in Roland (1988: 8) that in both India and Japan, the familial self predominates, whereas "the individual self is the predominant inner psychological organization of the Americans." Furthermore, it must be remembered that it is not necessary that caste structure in India be seen essentially as horizontal. Not only are the different castes arranged in a hierarchy, even subcastes within a caste are hierarchical. Also, although the caste system appears to be inflexible, it is actually surprisingly flexible in that rank within the hierarchies is negotiable under certain circumstances.[3] A more clear understanding of individual self vs. familial/group self and positive vs. negative face in different domains in both Western and Eastern cultures is necessary before one could argue about the universality of any proposed universal.

Finally, even in an ideal world, where we have answers to questions raised above, it is not clear how necessary or desirable it is to change language learners' behavior to make them conform to the performance of NSs of the target language. Note that I am not talking about making learners aware of the target language patterns. What I am concerned about is insistence on performance. Language use is intimately connected with our notions of who we are. Understanding and awareness of culturally different patterns of behavior, including the performance of speech acts, is one thing, adopting culturally different patterns of behavior wholesale is quite another. An Indian English speaker, though aware of American or British conventions, finds it very difficult to, for instance, to use as many 'thank yous' and 'I'm sorrys' in the intimate domain as do speakers of American or British English. Many Asian and African students are quite uncomfortable addressing their professors by their first names. Many European professors may be equally uncomfortable if their students address them by their first names. We do not have hard evidence to conclude that it is necessary, desirable, and, realistically speaking,

possible to effect change in verbal behavior among adult learners of a second language. On the contrary, we have evidence to suggest that human beings are socialized through language and attain a social and an individual identity in the process. Whether and to what extent these identities are permeable is a moot question..

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude this paper by making it relevant specifically to the teaching of English as an international language. One major source of interesting crosscultural speech act data is the set of varieties of English indigenized in culturally different contexts around the globe. Paradigms of research that look at an indigenized variety of English as a language with its own "complex network of meaning potential" (Halliday 1978) have important implications for ESL instructional as well as teacher education programs. If the ultimate goal of such programs is to encourage global bilingualism in English, a great deal of sensitivity toward what learners bring to the task of learning an additional language has to be developed. At present, there is a wide gap between the theoretical conceptualization of how children are socialized through language (for example, in Halliday 1975, Hasan 1988, Hasan and Cloran 1990, Heath 1983, Ochs 1982) and the pedagogical attempts in ESL programs to teach adult learners the idealized communicative competence of a monolingual speaker of English. A more realistic, and perhaps, more effective, pedagogical strategy would be to respect the social meanings learners bring to the language learning task and extend their range with those of the target language. This would be possible only if, as D'souza (1988) suggests, monolingual speakers of English realize the need for a wider awareness of the different meaning potentials of different varieties of English. Perhaps the time has come for the ESL teacher education programs to take a leading role in this venture and give it some priority on their agenda for theoretical and pedagogical research. In my view, a research agenda that pays attention to the issues discussed here is vital for meaningful research on communicative competence in world varieties of English and applications of such research for pedagogical purposes.

NOTES

[1] It is interesting to note that the same arguments can be made on the basis of data from varieties of English, certainly the indigenized varieties used in Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world.

[2] It is believed that remarks such as 'you look well' or 'your baby looks wonderful' may bring bad luck to the person thus commented upon.

[3] For a comprehensive discussion of caste, see Karve (1961), and for excellent case studies of this phenomenon by both Indian and Western social scientists, see Singer (1959).

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